

## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS: SUMMER 1990

by John B. Gabel

Mr. President, members of the Board and faculty, graduates, and friends:

It is an article of faith among commencement speakers--something they are under sacred obligation to say--that commencement is not an end but a beginning. Well, yes: for you graduates, this is, in a special sense, the first day of the rest of your lives. But without a doubt, what happens today is also a very real end--of one of the most significant parts of your lives. If we were obliged to assign a tutelary deity to this particular academic ceremony, the appropriate one would be Janus, the two-faced god of the ancient Romans, looking simultaneously toward what is past and what is yet to come.

As you graduates depart the University, you inevitably carry on your shoulder a mixed bag of impressions of your experience here. You will have in that bag--we very much hope--a strong sense of accomplishment, satisfaction at having pushed yourselves further than you knew you were capable of, and an awareness of the delight that comes from knowing something well. And you will have, we hope, memories (some of them guilty ones) of the good times: cutting classes on sunny spring afternoons so that you could offer advice to the preachers on the oval, taking part in the rituals of autumn Saturday afternoons, spending more time than you could probably afford checking things out on High Street on weekend evenings. And you will undoubtedly have memories of aggravations you could happily have lived without: the cursed hunting for parking space, trying to find alternatives for closed courses, standing in one damned line after another, having to work in a library where the collection is overtaxed and study space hard to come by.

Looking back, like you, as a fellow alumnus, I can remember enough of the not-so-pleasant things when I first came to Ohio State in the early 1950s: living in a ratty room on 9th avenue, trying to complete a Master's degree in a year while holding an off-campus job, deperately missing a far-off girlfriend, surviving on the food that \$1.50 a day would buy. But more than those things I remember an ineradicable sense of good fortune at just being able to be at Ohio State and a daily awareness that (whatever other hunger I could not satisfy) here was God's plenty of opportunity laid before me: the chance to study what mattered supremely to me, a superb library (not so crowded then), and an English-department faculty of notable accomplishment, among them names that older members of the University community will recall like Robert Estrich (a great, long-time chairman of the department), James Fullington (whose academic gown I wear today), Richard Altick, Ruth Hughey, Francis Lee Utley--they, and others like them, persons of great learning and tolerance for the unshaped enthusiasm of those in their charge. In my eyes there were, as the book of Genesis puts it, giants in the earth in those days; and I hope that for each of you graduates, there have been many--or some--of generous mind and spirit at Ohio State who have pushed you



and stretched you and helped you discover what rich possibilities lie within yourselves.

But the commencement-speaker's oath of office is quite right: this ceremony is one for looking forward. If you will permit another personal reference, I remember sitting in this building, just where you graduates are sitting, at summer commencement 29 years ago, looking forward indeed and worrying about the world into which I was being launched with my spanking new doctorate. After the ceremony that day, we all filed--as this class will file--into French Fieldhouse, where (in the general milling about) I found myself face-to-face with the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, John Bricker, former Governor of the State of Ohio, Vice-Presidential Running Mate of Thomas E. Dewey, and United States Senator. From his lofty station, he smiled kindly at me (or upon me), put his hand on my shoulder--that one right there--and said, "Good luck, young fellow." Well, I--and all of my fellow graduates--needed that luck. I was fortunate enough to be going off with my wife and children to a good job at another university. But the world into which we were heading was a severely troubled one. I remember in my second year on the job sending a telegram to President Kennedy, registering, along with many thousands of other citizens, my plea that he not launch the missiles at Cuba that might have begun the Third World War. And I remember, in the several years following, taking part in the general debate on whether we should be building bomb shelters in our back yards there, in central Illinois, deep in the heartland of America.

That was the world into which you graduates were born and in which you grew up. As the sluggish decades of the Cold War crept on, nothing seemed ever to change in international affairs. The good guys and the bad guys were both spending themselves into bankruptcy, while the instruments of mutual destruction increased in number obscenely from the thousands to the tens of thousands. As late as 1986, when many of you now graduating were already enrolled here, a major arms-control agreement fell through at the summit meeting in Reykjavik. What future could there be for another generation?

But curious things were beginning to happen in Central Europe, first in Poland, then elsewhere. Frustration, anger, a yearning for a hardly imaginable freedom swelled inexorably toward that astonishing night last November when the Berlin Wall cracked open. In the months that followed, the pace of change left us breathless. Every morning's newspaper, every evening's newscast brought word of developments of a sort that would have been unimaginable a year before--sometimes, indeed, just a week before.

Not merely were long-repressed peoples being set free to seek their own destinies; the whole Earth was granted a reprieve, and the ticking of the doomsday clock had apparently ceased. Those of you who, as freshmen in 1985, were faced with writing a term paper and went to the latest Britannica Book of the Year would have been confronted in that year's issue with a lead article entitled "Nuclear Winter: Its Discovery and Implications," the first sentence of which read, portentously, "No question in our time could be more important: How can we reduce the probability that any of this will ever happen?"



But now, this past spring, had you gone as seniors to the Britannica Book of the Year to dig out the makings of a term paper, you would have found in the 1990 volume a lead article by the Canadian Prime Minister entitled "The Future Has Started." O brave new world! We had feared for decades that something would fly out of the Soviet Union and land on us, and this summer it did. Two sleek MIG-29s headed straight for the Dayton International Airport, landed smartly, and sat there for all to see at the U.S. Air and Trade Show. The Soviets looked our planes over, our men looked theirs over, warm friendship was proclaimed on both sides, and the next day local newspapers featured a picture of a dashing, firm-jawed, sky-gazing airman who just happened to be a Russian. What a world this was in which to commence, a world the prospect of which inspired President Jennings to say in his address here to the spring graduating class, "Maybe--just maybe--during the next few decades, we will be challenged to manage peace." Early in the summer, when Dr. Jennings offered me the opportunity to add a postscript here today to his happy remarks, I was delighted to accept: what a wonderful world in which to send new graduates on their way!

But a funny thing happened on our way to this particular forum. A situation has boiled up in the Middle East that is dangerous in the extreme. Response and counter-response have followed one another so quickly that we are left as breathless as we were a couple of months ago with the changing news out of Eastern Europe. President Bush has termed Iraq's military advance "a threat to the American way of life." Addicted, suddenly addicted, as we are to low-priced gasoline for the automobiles that it is our God-given right to drive, who can say that Mr. Bush is wrong? What the outcome of the matter will be lies in the lap of the gods. Perhaps within these few weeks in which you graduates have been wrapping up the details of your academic programs, the groundwork has been laid for yet another extended war of attrition--a cold war in a hot place. Perhaps some dreadful miscalculation will uncork ultimate madness; perhaps infinite consequence will follow upon a mere accident. Or perhaps negotiation can bring about a good end of the matter. We can only wait, and watch, and hope.

I close by pointing out that this graduating class of the summer of 1990 has among it one member who is sitting not there on the floor but here on the stage--and that is President Jennings. This is the final commencement over which he will preside as chief executive of the Ohio State University. Tomorrow at 5 o'clock Edward Harrington Jennings, tenth President of the Ohio State University, will pull shut his office door and walk away as plain old Prof Ed Jennings, just one more faculty working-stiff. What a change that will make in his circumstances! To his credit, as president Dr. Jennings never had a reserved parking place and had to hunt for an opening along with the rest of us. But now when he gets a ticket for stopping illegally outside of Bricker Hall ("just for five minutes, officer"), he'll have to actually pay the fine! His about-to-be faculty colleagues can't wait to hear him complain about his football seats or the short-sightedness of administrators around this place.

He'll know the magic is gone when his colleagues' eyes glaze over each time he starts with "Now when I was in that job ...."

A mere ten presidents is not many to have served over the long span of time this university has been in existence. Simply to have been one of the ten is a great honor; to have filled the role as notably as Edward Harrington Jennings has filled it is an exceedingly greater one. "Excellence, excellence, excellence," he dinned into us through these nine years, so incessantly that we've come to believe we can achieve it. Ohio State's new leadership we expect to take advantage of that impetus and to quicken the pace of the University's run for the twenty-first century. Members of this graduating class can be proud to say that they were here when the race began.

To all of you graduates, those of us who remain behind say: use the good sense that you were born with and that Ohio State helped you develop further, godspeed, and, hey, be careful out there.